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THE SOURCE OF MATTHEW ARNOLD'S POEM,  
*THE SICK KING IN BOKHARA.*

DURING a course of study in which I was engaged, last year, under the direction of Professor A. V. Williams Jackson, I had occasion to consider certain phases of the subject of orientalism in the poems of Matthew Arnold. One of these poems, *The Sick King in Bokhara*, interested me specially, not only on account of the vivid simplicity with which the author has so charmingly depicted a scene and an episode of Eastern life, but because of the wonderful hues and tints of local color that flash throughout the poem. An excellent idea of this faithfulness to nature is given in a most interesting article entitled "Bokhara the Noble," recently published by Professor Jackson, in which the scene of the poem is set forth in all the light of personal observation.<sup>1</sup> It seemed to me rather extraordinary, at the time, that Arnold should have painted the picture with such minuteness and accuracy of detail, even though he had never visited the region of Bokhara. Accordingly, I determined to find the source from which he might have derived his material. After searching in vain for some time—as neither Arnold's Note-Book nor any critical works that I know of contain any allusion to the subject—I finally wrote to the poet's sister, Miss Frances Arnold, asking whether she could possibly enlighten me on this question. In reply, she very kindly sent me the following extract from a work on Bokhara by Lieut. Burnes, adding, however, that it was very doubtful whether her brother had actually obtained the story from that

<sup>1</sup> *The Outlook*, Vol. 79, No. 5; N. Y., Feb. 4, 1905.

source; it will be seen that the narrative bears a striking resemblance to Arnold's poem (*italics and spacings are my own*):<sup>2</sup>

"About twelve years since, a person who had violated the law proceeded to the palace, and, in the presence of the King, stated his crime, and demanded justice according to the Koran. The singularity of an individual appearing as his own accuser, induced the King to direct him to be driven away. The man appeared the following day with the same tale, and was again turned out. He repaired a third time to the palace, repeated his sins, and upbraided the King for his remissness in declining to dispense justice, which, as a believer of Mahommed, he entreated, might lead to his punishment in this world instead of *the next*. The *Ulema*, or congress of divines, was assembled: death was the punishment; and the man himself, who was a *Moollah*, was prepared for this decision. He was condemned to be stoned to death. He turned his face to Mecca, and, drawing his garment over his head, repeated the Kuluma, ("There is but one God, and Mahommed is his prophet!") and met his fate. The King was present, and threw the first stone: but he had instructed his officers to permit the deluded man to escape if he made the attempt. When dead the King wept over his corpse, ordered it to be *washed* and *buried*, and proceeded in person to the grave, over which he read the funeral service. It is said that he was much affected; and to this day verses commemorate the death of this unfortunate man, whom we must either pronounce a bigot or a *madman*."<sup>3</sup>

Although this passage is far from sufficient to account for the wealth of local color in *The Sick King in Bokhara*, nevertheless it furnishes abundant material for the story.

Shortly after receiving this communication, I succeeded in obtaining a copy of the book above-mentioned.<sup>4</sup> As I glanced through its pages, one of the first things that struck my eye was the following paragraph, occurring on the very next page to that of the selection already quoted, and, in view of Arnold's

<sup>2</sup> In this and the following quotations, *italics* will be used to indicate words actually used in both the poem and the source; spaced type, passages where the sense, if not the very words, is alike in both texts.

<sup>3</sup> See *infra*, Vol. II, p. 262, ll. 14 ff.

<sup>4</sup> *Travels into Bokhara, &c.*, by Lieut. Alexander Burnes, F. R. S., 3 vols. 2nd edition, London, 1835. There is a copy of it in the Phoenix Collection at Columbia University.

poem, admirably supplementing it; I reproduce the passage in full, because the book is a rare one and not easily accessible:

“A son who had *cursed his mother* appeared as a suppliant for justice, and his own accuser. The mother solicited his pardon and forgiveness; the son demanded punishment: the *Ulema* directed his death, and he was executed as a criminal in the streets of Bokhara.”<sup>5</sup>

The fact that Arnold has so ingeniously woven together these two stories into his poem is strong evidence in itself that he used Burnes's history as a source-book. Upon examining the volume more carefully, however, I discovered numerous indications that Arnold had undoubtedly gathered not only his plot, but practically all of his Oriental scenery and allusions, from three consecutive chapters of that work.<sup>6</sup> A few simple illustrations will serve to make this clear. Let us look, for instance, at Burnes's description of the King of Bokhara,<sup>7</sup> comparing it with Arnold's:

“I was, nevertheless, resolved to have a sight of royalty; and, at mid-day<sup>8</sup> on the following Friday, repaired to the great *mosque* . . . and saw his majesty and his court passing from prayers [at the time of prayer, § 8; to the mosque my lord passed on, § 10].<sup>9</sup> The King appeared to be under thirty years of age [O Vizier, thou art old, I young, § 44] . . . his visage gaunt and pale”—

suggesting Arnold's *Sick King*—

“He was plainly dressed in a *silken* robe of ‘udrus,’ with a white turban [silken raiment, § 47]. The Koran was *carried* in front of him [the holy book | carried before him, § 10], and he was preceded and followed by two *golden mace bearers* [push'd | the golden mace-bearers aside, § 8] . . . The present King has more state than any of

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 263, ll. 14 ff.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, chs. IX, X, XI.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, pp. 249, 250.

<sup>8</sup> Orthodox Mahommedans offer prayers at this hour as well as in the morning and evening.

<sup>9</sup> The quotations in brackets are from Arnold; I have used the standard edition (Macmillan & Co.) throughout, giving references to various sections of the poem.

his predecessors, but he may consider it necessary to affect humility in a temple, and in returning from a religious ceremony. . . . The character of this King"—

here we easily recognize the virtuous prince of Arnold's poem—

"stands high among his countrymen : at his elevation he gave away all his own wealth. . . . He is strict in his religious observances"—

Arnold's King goes to prayers three days in succession !—

"but less bigoted than his father"—

hence, perhaps, his liberal attitude toward the wretched Moollah.

To cite another striking coincidence,—we find in Burnes the following description of Bokhara's water supply :

"The city is intersected by *canals*, shaded by *mulberry trees*, which bring water from the *river of Samarcand*" ;

and, a little further down the page,

"In summer the inhabitants are sometimes deprived of good water for months, and when we were in Bokhara the canals had been dry for sixty days ; the snow had not melted in the highlands or Samarcand, and the scanty supply of the river had been *wasted* before reaching Bokhara. . . . After all, the water is bad.'"<sup>10</sup>

It is needless to point out the similarity between this passage and the lines from Arnold :

"Thou know'st how fierce  
In these last days the sun hath burn'd :  
That the green water in the tanks  
Is to a putrid puddle turn'd :  
And the *canal* that from the *stream*  
*Of Samarcand* is brought this way,  
*Wastes*, and runs thinner every day (§ 14).  
.  
.  
.  
Under some *mulberry-trees* I found  
A little pool . . . (§ 15)  
.  
.  
.  
With cisterns for the winter rain" (§ 46).

The two pictures are identical.

<sup>10</sup> Burnes, Vol. II, p. 257, ll. 10 ff.

Again, a notable case of parallelism may be seen in the two extracts below ; the fact that the quotations from Burnes all appear in a single paragraph clearly emphasizes our point of argument :

“One wonders at the never-ending employment of the fruiterers, in dealing out their grapes, melons, apricots, apples, peaches, pears and plums. . . . One may purchase. . . . *grape* jelly or *syrup*, mixed up with chopped ice. This abundance of *ice* is one of the greatest luxuries in Bokhara. . . . It is a refreshing sight to see the huge masses of it, with the thermometer at 90°, *coloured*, scraped, and piled into heaps like *snow*.”<sup>11</sup>

Arnold’s rendering of this into verse is remarkably exact :

“Happy he who lodges there !  
With silken raiment, store of rice,  
And for this drought all kinds of fruits,  
*Grape syrup*, squares of *colour’d ice*,  
‘With *cherries*<sup>12</sup> serv’d in drifts of *snow*.’” (§§ 44, 45).

From the foregoing examples, it is unmistakably evident, I think, that Matthew Arnold made use of Burnes’s history with care,—and, need it be added, most effectively,—in writing his poem. Were this fact at all doubtful, in the face of the various arguments already adduced, it can be proven conclusively by the following table, in which I have noted, in parallel columns, a large number of additional references :

ARNOLD.	BURNES.
1. <sup>13</sup> O most just <i>Vizier</i> , send away The <i>cloth-merchants</i> , and let them be, Them and their <i>dues</i> . . .	<sup>14</sup> 248 : 8 ff. The <i>Vizier</i> . . . was transacting business, and . . . levying duties on the <i>merchants</i> . . . . The <i>webs of cloth</i> are produced, and every <i>fortieth</i> piece is taken in place of duties.
THE VIZIER	
2. O merchants . . . To-morrow come, and ye shall pay	

<sup>11</sup> Burnes, Vol. II, pp. 237, 238.

<sup>12</sup> In Vol. II, p. 223, l. 8, Burnes speaks also of “sherbet of *cherries*, cooled by ice.”

<sup>13</sup> Numbers refer to sections, as before.

<sup>14</sup> References are to Vol. II, by page and line.

## ARNOLD.

## BURNES.

*Each fortieth web of cloth to me,  
As the law is, and go your  
way.*

3. Ferdusi . . .  
4. The great window of the gate  
Looking into the *Registân* ;  
Where through the sellers'  
booths . . .  
43. . . the poor man,  
Who loiters by the high-heap'd  
booths  
Below there, in the *Registân*.  
15. Went up on the roof to sleep.<sup>15</sup>  
36. Upon the northern *frontier*,  
where  
The watchers of two  
armies stand  
Near one another, many a man,  
Seeking a prey unto his hand,  
37. Hath snatched a little fair-  
hair'd slave:  
They snatch also, towards  
*Mervè*,  
The *Shiah* dogs, who pasture  
sheep,  
And up from thence to  
*Urghendjè*.  
39. The *Kaffirs* also . . .  
There are the *lepers* . . .  
42. They that bear rule, and are  
obey'd,  
Unto a rule more strong than  
theirs

256 : 12. Ferdoosy  
234 : 3. The *Registan* of Bokhara  
is the name given to a spacious area  
in the city, near the palace, which  
opens upon it. . . . Idlers and news  
mongers assemble round the wares  
of Asia and Europe, which are here  
exposed for sale.

258 : 8. The common houses . . .  
are all flat-roofed.

253 : 16. The Mahomedans are  
not sensible of any offence in enslav-  
ing the Russians. . . . "If we pur-  
chase Russians," they say, "the Rus-  
sians buy the Kuzzaks on our *frontier*."

251 : 32. Russian outpost . . .  
242 : 11. There was one unfortu-  
nate girl, who . . . was now exposed  
for sale by her master. . . .

283 : 19. *Merve*.  
241 : 25. The Uzbeks do not con-  
sider a *Shiah* to be a true believer. . . .

242 : 3. I heard one of them telling  
how he had been seized south of  
Meshid, while tending his flocks.

242 : 20. The bazars of Bokhara  
are chiefly supplied from *Orgunje*.

241 : 29. After the intended pur-  
chaser is satisfied of the slave being  
an infidel (*kaffir*), he examines his  
body, particularly noting if it be free  
from *leprosy*.

251 : 1. The life of the King of  
Bokhara is less enviable than that of  
most private men . . . <sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> This is common in nearly all Eastern countries, and was not necessarily suggested by Burnes. I mention it, however, as a possible parallel.

<sup>16</sup> Here follows a list of the various forms of "red tape" to which the King is subjected.

## ARNOLD.

## BURNES.

Are in their turn obedient  
made . . .

49. And what I would, I cannot do.

45. In vain hath a king power to  
build

Houses, arcades, *enamell'd*  
*mosques* . . .

238 : 28. As one withdraws . . . he  
winds his way through arched  
bazzars . . . and passes *mosques*, sur-  
mounted by handsome cupolas . . .

258 : 12. The greatest of the public  
buildings is a *mosque* . . . It is covered  
with *enamelled* tiles of an azure blue.

. . .

51. I have a fretted brick-work  
tomb . . .

258 : 21. It is built of *bricks*, which  
have been distributed in most in-  
genious patterns.

Hard by a close of *apricots* . . .

239 : 32. They sent to the bazar for  
ice and *apricots*.

In concluding this brief sketch, it might be fitting to add a word or two concerning the literary significance of Matthew Arnold's poems at the present time. Not only are they rapidly growing in popularity, but they are exciting more appreciation than ever, on the part of students of classic literature. From the standpoint of criticism, therefore, the discovery of the source of *The Sick King in Bokhara* is a particularly fortunate one; for while it certainly fills a gap, so to speak, in the great volume of modern bibliography, it is of much greater importance in that it throws light on the poet's remarkable talent in selection and construction. It is to be hoped that the foregoing outline, although by no means exhaustive, may have succeeded in bringing before the notice of the literary public a few points of interest.

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